BRIEFING
Subject: 2023 Downtown Pedestrian Zone

Presented to: Governance and Finance | Date: December 18, 2023

Submitted by: Dave Michaels, Manager, Planning Services | Item #: 4.2

This Briefing is submitted for acceptance into the Corporate Record.

BACKGROUND

Reason for Report

At the December 5, 2022, Governance and Finance meeting, the following motion was passed:

FIN22-331 That the Governance and Finance Committee recommend that Council direct Administration to return to Council no later than 2023 Q3 with a report addressing the 2023 Summer Banff Avenue Pedestrian Zone.

MOTION CARRIED

Summary of Issue

2023 was the last year of the approved summer Banff Avenue Pedestrian Zone. The pedestrian zone was created in 2020 as part of the pandemic response and Council continued the project as a pilot supporting economic recovery and returning visitation in 2022 and 2023. This briefing is to provide a review of the pedestrian zone and the improvements that were made, following Council direction at the 2023 Service Review.

Visitation Estimates

There are a number of pedestrian counters on Banff Avenue that have been used in the past to determine pedestrian volume throughout the year. In previous years, spot visitation counts have been conducted to assess visitation numbers to the downtown pedestrian zone, with peak pedestrian counts surpassing 39,000 per day. The pedestrian volume on the west sidewalks during the pedestrian zone was the same in 2023 as 2019. However, since the existing downtown pedestrian counter array is designed around sidewalks and not around the entire roadway, a number of in-person audits were conducted to understand the percentage of pedestrians that use the central pedestrian movement corridor of the pedestrian zone vs the sidewalk. As such, administration estimates that there were 20 - 30% more pedestrians on Banff Avenue during the summer of 2023 than the summer of 2019.

This equates to estimated pedestrian volumes in the range of 20,000 – 30,000 on most days with a strong correlation between vehicle volumes in the town entrance and pedestrian volumes of around 0.92 (e.g. for every 100 vehicles entering or exiting town, there were 92 pedestrian movements estimated downtown).

Business Participation

Participation by sidewalk cafes and outdoor merchandise displays was roughly the same as 2022 with a total of 27 restaurants/cafes (one less than 2022) and 10 retailers (two less than 2022). Revenue from the associated sidewalk seating or retail display permits was approximately $142,800. In conversations with operators and those who chose not to operate, a common constraint was access to labour.

Transit Performance

Roam transit was accommodated in the pedestrian zone again in 2023, with ridership rebounding significantly. As with previous years, accessibility ramps were installed at all stop locations and enhancements were made by Roam to improve the visibility of the transit stops in the pedestrian zone. The Operations team modified transit access gates in response to challenges experienced in 2021 and as a result gate "up-time" was improved with only a few days of operation being redirected to Beaver St. Roam's schedule adherence was negatively impacted by having only single lane travel, as buses regularly had to wait while other buses to pass through the zone. This was made easier with two more additional bus passing areas, however, the increased number of buses on these routes resulted in delays as buses waited for each other. At peak, there were 16 buses (8 each way) per hour in the pedestrian zone.

Bike Valet

Banff & Lake Louise Tourism (BLLT) once again supported the pedestrian zone through providing the service of a bike valet on the 200 block. This is a staffed, fenced location for free and secure bicycle and e-bike parking. At the 2023 Service Review, an additional $7,000 was approved for improvements to the bike valet (FIN22-320). A number of improvements were made including signs, a change in location, fencing and charging for e-bikes. Over the term of the pedestrian zone in 2023, 6,838 bicycles were accommodated, an increase of 55% on the previous year. Additionally, BLLT provided visitor information and recommendations while operating the bike valet and engaged with a total of 10,607 visitor groups.

Bike Valet 2023

Traffic Management

As reported in the November 27, 2023, report to Council, overall traffic congestion was down this summer compared to pre-pandemic 2019 numbers, and fewer delays over 15 minutes were recorded primarily due to the increased use of intercept parking and a mode shift to public transit. At the same time, vehicles were diverted to Beaver and Lynx streets, which saw more traffic than when Banff Avenue is open to vehicles. One of the consequences of diverting southbound traffic east on Wolf Street and south on Beaver Street is that drivers are exposed to the entrances to town's busiest visitor pay parking lots, rather than a straight route of traffic over the bridge.

A number of traffic management tactics were included in the budget for the pedestrian zone for 2023. These included:

- Flagging at key intersections during peak periods – This tactic involved the deployment of flaggers to help facilitate additional vehicle throughput at key intersections. This service is delivered through an external contractor.
- Signs informing and directing vehicles – This tactic involved multiple signs throughout town to inform visitors about detour routes and other related information.
- Signalization upgrades and optimizations - This tactic involved upgrading signals and associated detection equipment at both Banff Avenue / Wolf Street and Banff Avenue / Buffalo Street. New detection hardware for transit busses increased the efficiency of each intersection by eliminating "false detections" for Roam busses that had been observed in 2022.
- Additional landscape planters for traffic management – This tactic was intended to allow for the purchase of additional seasonal landscape planters along detour routes with a primary goal being to ensure parking behaviours didn't occur that would impeded traffic flow.

In addition, at the 2023 Service Review, $20,000 was approved for ad-hoc traffic counts on Muskrat, Buffalo, Beaver and Lynx Street (FIN22-323). Vehicle counts were taken at four locations (Beaver St 100 Block, Muskrat St 100 Block, Buffalo St 300 Block and Wolf St 200 Block), over three separate time periods (May 8 – 14 pre pedestrian zone, May 29 – June 4 just after opening pedestrian zone and July 10 – 16). The data collected confirms that directly adjacent streets see an increase in vehicle volume with the pedestrian zone in place. More specifically, there was an increase of 51% (from a peak of 134 vehicles per hour to a peak of 202 vehicles per hour) on Beaver Street the week after the opening of the pedestrian zone over the week prior.

Beaver Street has the town's only coach bus parking lot in downtown Banff with 13 bus parking stalls. BLLT suggests full international visitation has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, but coach activity on Bear Street was identified as high for some periods this year, with several peak hours experiencing loading/unloading outside the parking lot behind the Mount Royal Hotel. In addition, there are public and private surface vehicle parking lots with a combined total of over 240 parking stalls, and an additional 78 on street parking stalls, that can be accessed from Beaver Street.

It is also worth noting that over the last five years, there have been a number of other changes to our transportation ecosystem that have occurred including intercept parking, visitor paid parking, additional traffic management, increased transit, Nancy Pauw bridge, all of which are intended to address visitor vehicle congestion within our community. A Vehicle Volume Study based on the existing data and the data collected during three, 1 week surveys in 2023 on Beaver Street, Wolf Street and Muskrat Street is included as Attachment 1.

From the traffic data collected, administration also notes that:

- Vehicles crossing the Banff Ave Bridge as a proportion of incoming vehicles increased by 19% when Banff Avenue re-opened to cars in 2023 – i.e. a higher proportion of people chose to drive over the Bridge when more roads were made available.
- There was a 21% improvement in efficiency of left turn movements onto Buffalo Street (towards the post office) from the Banff Ave Bridge when the pedestrian zone was in place.
- The feedback from our Emergency Service providers is that the pedestrian zone does not impact their operations.

Visual Improvements

The overall 'look' of the pedestrian zone remained the same in 2023, with the continuation of the earlier successes including required landscaping for café participants, standardized menu stands and limits to other signage, the use of natural materials, reduced mass and scale of sidewalk cafe barriers, and greater species variety in the Town's seasonal landscaping deployments. These improvements were borne out of Council amendments to *Sidewalk Seating Policy C7005-1* and *Outdoor Merchandising Policy C5006* in March 2022. Administration notes that 2023 had an increase in the number of operators installing furniture, signs and other items that were unapproved which required ongoing enforcement.

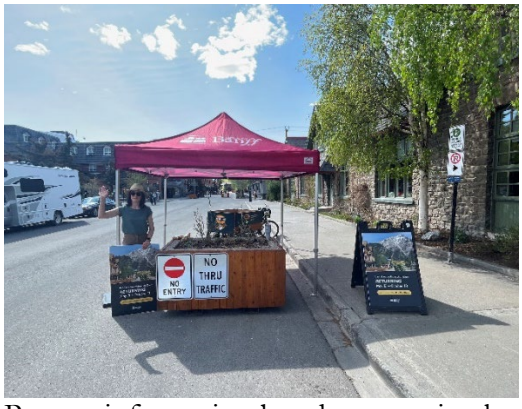
Dates

The dates of the pedestrian zone for 2023 were from the May long weekend to Thanksgiving, in accordance with previous Council direction.

Public Outreach and Education

At the 2023 Service Review, an additional $15,000 was approved for public outreach and education (FIN22-322). Administration conducted a number of additional outreach and education initiatives prior to that start of the 2023 pedestrian zone. This included:

- Online advertising and notification through Banff.ca and social media;
- A news release which was emailed to subscribers and media;
- News letter notification;
- Newspaper advertising;
- Posters and displays around town;
- Mountain FM radio advertising;
- A number of pop-up information booths at varying locations, including at Disaster Readiness Day;
- Additional notification signs through Banff.



Pop-up information booths at varying locations

Additional notification signs

2023 – Pedestrian zone related motions

At the 2023 Service Review, a number of motions arising out of the pedestrian zone discussions were passed:

FIN22-324 *That Governance and Finance Committee recommend that Council direct Administration to begin discussions with Liricon around how to expedite the construction of the northside stalls and/or reconfigure the existing Fenlands parking lot to increase stall count.*

MOTION CARRIED

Administration discussed with Liricon Capital the potential for expediting the construction of stalls on the north side of the railroad including the potential reconfiguration of the existing Fenlands parking lot with the goal of increasing intercept parking capacity. Liricon Capital indicated that these areas are included within the Area Redevelopment Plan and would prefer they be considered as part of the plan review process.

FIN22-327 *That the Governance and Finance Committee recommend that Council direct Administration to engage a third-party consultant to investigate and identify parcels of land within the existing Town of Banff boundary that could be used in a trade/ swap for land outside of the existing Town of Banff boundary to create an east entrance intercept parking lot and further, that a budget of up to $30,000, funded through the Visitor Pay Parking Reserve, be allocated to this undertaking.*

MOTION CARRIED

FIN22-328 *That the Governance and Finance Committee recommend that Council direct Administration request Parks Canada consider implementing pay parking at the Sulphur Mountain Gondola – Upper Hot Springs.*

MOTION CARRIED

Administration embarked on an initial conversation with Parks Canada's Banff Field Unit regarding the potential for transportation solutions that extended beyond the town boundary. Parks Canada indicated that their preference would be to take a high-level approach to transportation in Banff National Park that would be informed by the *Expert Advisory Panel on Moving People Sustainably in the Banff Bow Valley*. The release of the "What we Heard" report on the Expert Panel is scheduled for mid-December, 2023.

Response Options
Accept this report into the Corporate Record.

OTHER INFORMATION

Budget

Council approved a total budget with expenses of $216,000 for the pedestrian zone in 2023. A number of additional items were approved at the 2023 Service Review, which have been highlighted through this report. The total budget was funded through the Economic Recovery Reserve.

The budget for the pedestrian zone project is split over multiple departments and a summary is provided here:

Service Area	Budget (2023)	Expense (2023)
Original Approved Budget		
Flagging at key intersections (Pedestrian Zone only)	$ 73,000.00	$ 51,000.00
Streets - Setup and Tear Down	$ 37,000.00	$ 23,014.00
Signage	$ 38,000.00	$ 22,708.00
Bike Valet	$ 4,000.00	$ 4,700.00
Municipal Parks - Plants, Plants Labour, Litter Picking, Curb Sweeping, Irrigation, Extended Time Frame	$ 64,000.00	$ 42,054.00
Original Approved Budget	**$ 216,000.00**	**$ 143,476.00**
Additional Approved Budget Items		
Signalization upgrades and optimization	$ 20,000.00	$ 35,370.00
Bike Valet Improvements	$ 7,000.00	
additional landscape planters for traffic management	$ 25,000.00	$ 14,368.00
Public Outreach	$ 15,000.00	$ 2,704.00
ad-hoc traffic counts on Muskrat, Buffalo, Beaver and Lynx Street	$ 20,000.00	$ 21,012.00
Additional Approved Budget Items	**$ 87,000.00**	**$ 73,454.00**
TOTAL	**$ 303,000.00**	**$ 216,930.00**

Actual costs as of December 1 were approximately $217,000 with no additional expenses anticipated. Primary areas of savings were flagging and wages as a proposed additional seasonal position was unable to be filled. Wage and housing were identified as a factor for being unable to hire for this position. Revenues from cafes and outdoor merchandising permits within the pedestrian zone were approximately $142,800 in 2023.

Administration notes that other additional operational costs of managing the pedestrian zone were absorbed into the general operating budget of numerous departments.

Internal Resources
The pedestrian zone pulls together staff from multiple teams including Operations, Communications, Planning and Environment, Engineering, Municipal Enforcement, and Emergency Services.

ATTACHMENTS
Attachment: Vehicle Volume Study

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